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SUNDAY READING.

THE HISTORY OF JOHN the BAPTIST.

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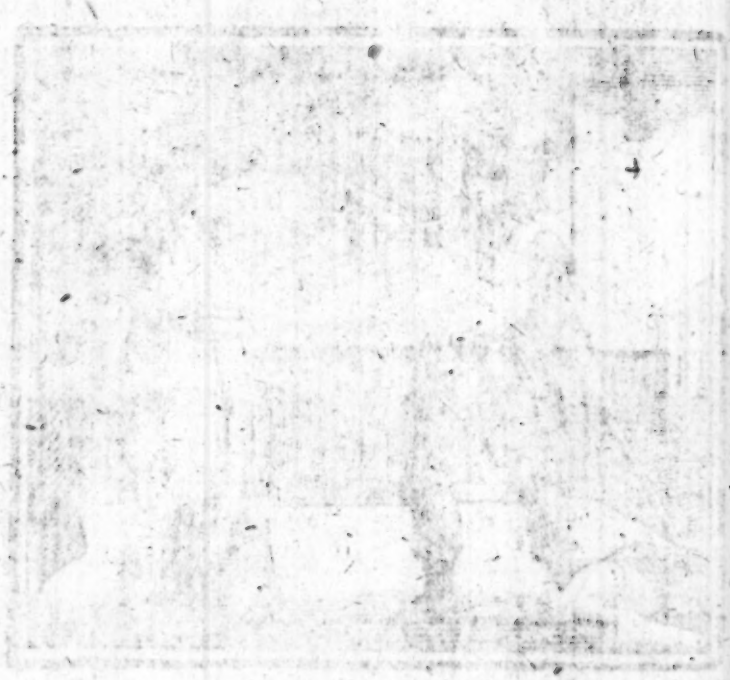

JOHN the BAPTIST.

ZACHARIAS, the father of John the Baptiſt, was a prieſt, who miniſtered before the Lord; his wife's name was Elizabeth, and ſhe was of the family of Aaron. They were both, we are told, righteous people, "walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameleſs." Zacharias and his wife were both arrived at an advanced age, but had no child; all hope of ſuch an event had long ſubſided, and they ſaw themſelves deſcending childleſs to the grave. It was Zacharias's turn, according to his office of prieſt, to burn incenſe in the Temple, while the people were praying without. While he was thus employed, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, ſtanding on the right ſide of the Altar, and Zacharias was ſtruck with fear and conſternation. But the heavenly meſſenger bade him not be alarmed, for that his prayer

prayer was heard, and that his wife Elizabe
ſhould bear him a ſon, whoſe name he ſhould ca
John. "Thou ſhalt have joy and gladneſs," con
tinued the angel, "and many ſhall rejoice at h
birth. For he ſhall be great in the ſight of th
Lord, and ſhall drink neither wine nor ſtron
drink; and he ſhall be filled with the Holy Ghoſ
even from his mother's womb; and many of th
children of Iſrael ſhall he turn to the Lord the
God. And he ſhall go before him, in the ſpir
and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the father
to the children, and the diſobedient to the wiſdo
of the juſt, to make ready a people prepared fo
the Lord."

"He ſhall drink neither wine nor ſtrong drink.
By theſe words of the angel we clearly ſee, ho
totally repugnant to the holy ſpirit is every kind o
exceſs; if we expect that our bodies ſhould b
temples for the holy ſpirit of God to inhabit, fo
which the ſcripture tells us they are deſigned, w
muſt keep them purified from all uncleanneſs, w
muſt avoid intemperance, either in drinking or ea
ing; the firſt naturally inflames the paſſions, an
the laſt, gluttony, which is a vice of no leſs magn
tude, renders our apprehenſion dull, and our ſpi
rits ſluggiſh, and incapable of entering with alacr
ty into our religious duties. Temperance and mo
deration fit us, on the contrary, to receive a
thoſe ſpiritual gifts and holy graces which our he
venly father has promiſed to beſtow on thoſe wh
walk before him in true ſimplicity of heart, an
faith in his promiſes: we cannot pleaſe God with
ou

ut faith, and ought to make it our conſtant prayer hat he will be pleaſed to give us that true convic- ion of the truth of his word, that is neceſſary for ur happineſs here, and our ſalvation hereafter; I y, for *our happineſs here*; for ſurely nothing can dd to it ſo eſſentially as a faith in thoſe glorious romiſes made to us throughout the holy ſcriptures, ll tending to aſſure us of a bleſſed immortality, hen we have laid down the cumberſome ſhackles f this mortal life; what but this could enable us o ſtruggle, without repining with the various ills e are doomed to encounter in our pilgrimage hrough this world, where every revolving day rings along with it pain or ſorrow, guilt, or diſ- ppointment; for I believe that were the beſt and he happieſt, ſingly and impartially to review each articular day of his exiſtence, he would find few hat were not marked with one of theſe; ſome ranſitory cloud, will intervene, to throw a gloom ver our brighteſt enjoyments; and though many f us may flatter ourſelves we are exempt from ctual guilt, we ſhall, I fear, find ourſelves, upon n impartial review of our conduct, too often cul- able, from the omiſſion of good, if not from the ommiſſion of evil: our very thoughts will often ondemn us, how ſeldom do we keep that ſtrict guard pon them, which the depravity of human nature enders indiſpenſibly neceſſary, how vain and ight, to ſay no worſe, are they at the beſt, how ar removed from that purity of which we have a model in the life of our bleſſed Saviour? Such is he evil our great enemy the devil has, and is ill conſtantly ſowing into our nature, that the

life

life of the true and ſincere chriſtian muſt be a conſtant warfare.

"The fleſh luſteth againſt the ſpirit," ſaith St. Paul, "continually," but how earneſtly will the chriſtian ſtruggle with the evil of his nature! how joyfully will he encounter all that his ſpiritual or temporal enemies can contrive, when he reflects on that bleſſed immortality which will reward all his toils, and be the price of his victory! without a firm faith in the promiſes of God, how languid would be his efforts, how joyleſs his exiſtence we will ſuppoſe him ſurrounded with affluence and that the low enjoyments of ſenſe, in other words, the pleaſures of this life can content him; in this caſe what a torment will it be to him to reflect on the ſhortneſs of human exiſtence; to reflect that every day brings him nearer to that period when he muſt give up all thoſe things in which his happineſs is centered, and enter upon a ſtate of exiſtence wholly new to him, on which perhaps, he has not beſtowed a thought, or has formed only vague and confuſed ideas; for confuſed and uncertain all ideas muſt be on this ſubject, to one who does not take the light of revelation, which God, in mercy to our blindneſs and forlorn condition, has granted us: faith, therefore, in the promiſes of God is not only neceſſary to our eternal welfare, but to our happineſs in this life, and this faith muſt be kept up not only by conſtantly reading and reflecting on the unſpeakable goodneſs of God; but, by conſtant prayer and ſupplication; for we find that Satan has

ath ſometimes inſinuated doubts into the hearts
f righteous and holy men, as in the inſtance of
acharias, who though no doubt fully ſenſible of the
ercy and power of God, diſcovered a reluctance
o believe the miſſion of the angel, whom the
ord had ſent to him; for when the holy meſſen-
er told him, that his wife ſhould conceive and
ear a ſon, inſtead of replying as the Virgin Mary
id, when ſaluted as the mother of the holy Jeſus,
be it unto me according to thy word," he ſaid
o the angel, "whereby ſhall I know this, ſeeing
am an old man and my wife well ſtricken in
ears?" To which the angel replied, "I am Ga-
riel, who ſtand in the preſence of God, and am
ent to ſpeak unto thee, and to ſhew thee theſe
lad tidings; but becauſe thou believeſt not my
ords, which ſhall be fulfilled in their ſeaſon,
ehold thou ſhalt be dumb, and not able to ſpeak
ill the day that theſe things ſhall be performed."

The angel then diſappeared, and Zacharias went
ut of the temple to the people who waited with-
ut, and were much ſurprized at his ſtaying ſo
ong; but when he came out of the temple, and
as unable to ſpeak to them, no doubt their
ſtoniſhment was ſtill greater; Zacharias made
igns, by which they ſoon underſtood that he had
een a viſion, and was become ſpeechleſs. When
he days of his miniſtration were accompliſhed,
Zacharias returned to his houſe; and Elizabeth,
is wife, according to the word of the Lord, con-
ceived and in due time brought forth a ſon; dur-
ng her pregnancy ſhe received a viſit from the

Virgin

Virgin Mary, who was shortly to become the
ther of the holy Jesus, and at Mary's salutati
the babe leaped in her womb, upon which Eliz
Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost,
broke out in a loud voice saying, "Blessed
thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of
womb; whence is this, that the mother of
Lord," (meaning the expected Messiah) "shou
come unto me? for lo! as soon as thy salutatio
sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my wom
for joy: and blessed is she that believed; for the
shall be a performance of those things that wer
told her from the Lord."

On the eighth day, according to the custom
the Jews, the child was taken to the temple to
circumcised, and they called his name Zachar
after his father; but his mother forbade them, sa
ing "that his name should be John." This su
prized all present as none of his relations bore th
name, and they applied to the father to know ho
he would have him called, upon which he wro
"His name is John; and immediately his spee
restored to him; his tongue was loosed, and
spake and praised God;" well indeed he mig
praise the God, of whose power and mercy he h
had such recent and forcible proofs!

The extraordinary circumstances that attend
the birth of Zacharias's son were noised abo
throughout all Judea, and made a deep impressi
upon the minds of many, who, we are told, sa
them up in their hearts, saying, "What manner
chi

uld may this be? They were no doubt curious enquire particulars concerning one whose birth angel had predicted should cause many to re-ice. The child grew, we are informed, and wax-strong in spirit; by the providence of God he caped the cruel persecution, which Herod, the ng of Judea, raised against all the children un-er two years old, with the view of destroying sus among the number, and retired early into e deserts, where he led a life of solitude and ortification; he wore only a rough *garment made f camels hair, and fed upon locusts and wild honey.*

By locusts some understand a creature resembling grass-hopper; a particular sort of which, are said be a common meat in the eastern and southern rts, and also in Palestine. Other authors sup-ose locusts to mean the tops of plants and herbs.

While St. John was in the wilderness the word God came to him, and he began to preach the aptism of repentance. His bold and resolute eaching, joined with the severity of his life, drew him many hearers, and a great number of his roselytes were baptized, confessing their sins. aptism was a rite before made use of by the Jews, ut till St. John's time, was never used to figure ut repentance and remission of sin. Repentance eing the principal qualification required of those ho became St. John's disciples, and as is justly bserved, the fittest to dispose them to receive their aviour, and to entitle them to that pardon of sin hich the gospel brought along with it.

So

So great was the purity of St. John's life a
doctrine, and such the high estimation in wh
he was held among the Jews, that many began
doubt whether he was not the promised Messi
for it is said, that "all men mused in their he
of John, whether he were the Christ or no
John, however, ingenuously declares to th
that he was not the Christ; "I indeed," says h
"baptize you with water; but one mightier th
I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not w
thy to unloose; he shall baptize you with the Ho
Ghost and with fire."

Our Lord himself bears a striking testimony
John's character, when he says, "among tho
that are born of women there hath not arise
greater than John the Baptist;" he further adds t
he came neither *eating nor drinking*, which, say
pious author, implies a way of life more than or
narily rigorous and austere. Indeed the sole a
of his preaching seems to have been to conde
the vices of all ranks of men, to enforce the pra
tice of virtue in their respective stations, and
proclaim to the Jews the approach of their promi
Messiah, and to warn them, by a repentance
their sins, and a reformation of their lives, to
themselves to receive the glad tidings of the g
pel.

Isaiah speaks of St. John, as "The voice of
crying in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of
Lord and make straight in the desart a way
our God." And the prophet Malachi calls h
"

the Meſſenger that was to prepare the way of Lord."

St. John's preaching attacked the vices of man, d too forcibly not to raiſe him up enemies a, ng the wicked; Herodias, who was kept by rod, though ſhe was his brother's wife, pro- ked at the freedom with which John cenſured ir inceſtuous commerce, conceived ſo violent a red againſt him, that nothing leſs than his life uld ſatisfy her. She uſed all her influence, erefore, with Herod to induce him to gratify her venge, and would probably, without difficulty, ve ſucceeded, had not Herod feared an inſurrec- n of the people, who all looked upon John as a ophet. Herod, however, cauſed him to be ſeiz- and thrown into priſon, though he did not ven- e at that time to gratify the extent of Herodias's lice. This wicked woman, however, ſtill thirſt- for his blood, and on the watch for a fit oppor- nity to effect her wicked purpoſe, ſoon hit on e, which ſucceeded but too well.

On the celebration of Herod's birth day, ſhe ntrived that her daughter, whom ſhe had no ubt previouſly inſtructed for the purpoſe, ſhould nce before the king, who was ſo pleaſed with her rformance, that he promiſed with an oath, that would give her whatever ſhe ſhould aſk: but hat muſt have been ſurely his aſtoniſhment, as lſo that of all preſent, when the damſel, replied, Give me here John the Baptiſt's head in a arger."

One

One cannot think of the request without horr
more especially when we consider it as proceed
from the mouth of a female: *the king*, we a
told, *was sorry*; whether from remorse, or,
there is too much reason to believe, fear of
people, nevertheless for his oath's sake, and the
which sat at meat with him, he ordered it to
given her. Executioners, but too ready to ob
the commands of the tyrant, were sent immediate
to behead John in prison, and his head was brou
in a charger and given to the damsel, who presen
the bloody offering to her mother.

We see from this melancholy tale, in the fi
place, the folly of making unconditional promis
that is to say, of making promises before we kn
whether it will be in our power to perform them
all, of whether we can perform them consiste
with the laws of God, in other words, consiste
with the laws of justice and equity; our impr
dence, nay, our wickedness, is still farther heig
ened, when we confirm such engagements by
oath, as in the instance before us.

Herod, without reflecting that the demand
the damsel might be something that it was impro
for him to grant, gave an unconditional promi
he probably thought she would make some triv
request, suited to her age and station, a splen
dress, perhaps, or a splendid portion, yet he w
impious enough to call upon his Maker to witn
a promise seemingly of such small importanc
How greatly do they, and, such I am sorry to
th

ere are, insult their Maker, who, like Herod, bituate themselves upon the most trivial occa- ns to call upon his holy name! This is a habit ich many unthinkingly fall into, and which ould be carefully avoided: surely if we reflect r a moment on the greatness and immensity of at Being, whose mercy and long-suffering gives still, in spite of our repeated offences, time to flect, we shall wonder at the presumption of the orm, that dares offend against that holy com- andment which has said, "Thou shalt not take e name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the ord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his me in vain." But to return.

Herod, we are told, was sorry; nevertheless, r his oath's sake, and them that sat at meat with m, he caused the head of John to be given her: *them that sat at meat with him* are we to un- rstand, that the nobles of his court urged him the deed? This is very probable, Herodias had, doubt, her creatures, who, to gain her favour, d forward their own interest, would readily sup- rt her views and pamper her vices; alas! the eat have but too frequently, at their elbow such rasites, ever ready to insinuate poison into their arts, and pervert their understandings. Or did erod rather take the life of this holy man than ve a promise unperformed which he had made fore his whole court?

Alas! the fear of the world too often operates re powerfully than the fear of love or God upon the

the human heart, and we often ſhrink at the id
of our neighbour's being privy to an action, whi
we are hardy enough to commit without ſcruple
the preſence of our God. Strange infatuation, that
ſhould fear thoſe who have power merely to ki
or mortify the body, and not fear him who h
power to kill both body and ſoul.

Whatever were the motives that might urge Her
to the commiſſion of the horrid deed, we ſee, th
through the machinations of a wicked woman,
prophet of the Lord, a meſſenger ſent to prep
the way of the bleſſed Jeſus, was brought to
untimely end, to the inexpreſſible grief of his d
ciples and of the Jews in general; by whom he w
held in ſuch eſteem and veneration, that it is
corded by Joſephus, a Jewiſh writer, that when
army, which Herod ſome time after ſent againſt
father-in-law, was over-thrown, they aſcribed
defeat to the juſt judgment of God againſt Her
as a puniſhment for his putting John the Baptiſt
death.

THE END.

A LIST of TRACTS.

HISTORIES.

Delays are Dangerous.
The Affectionate Sisters.
The Wreck.
The Wife Reformed.
Betty Gilbis.
Jeremiah Wilkins.
Murder in the Wood.
The Good Step-Mother.
Never fly from your Duty, &c.

SUNDAY READINGS.

The Widow of Zarephath.
Ananias and Sapphira.
The History of Samson.
The History of St. Peter the Apostle.
The Sower. A Parable.
The Unfruitful Fig Tree.
Eli the High Priest.
David the Chosen of God.
John the Baptist.

POETRY.

Richard and Rebecca.
The Good Aunt.
The Wanderer.
The Fatal Choice.
Easter Monday.
Mistaken Evil.
The Distressed Mother.
Elisha; or, the only true Way of subduing Enemies.
Jack Flint the Soldier. Part I.